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ABSTRACT

Two points--that arrangement is as important as invention in the study of rhetoric and that coherence, vital to arrangement, can be more fully understood through discourse analysis--are argued in this paper. Following a brief review of the literature that stresses the importance of arrangement and the contributions of linguistic research to rhetoric, a call is made for studies that examine the relationship among the three arts of rhetoric--invention, arrangement, and style--with coherence viewed as integral to an understanding of arrangement. A teaching technique for an informal use of discourse analysis in the classroom to introduce composition or literature students to principles of arrangement and to help them with problems of coherence is appended. (AEA)

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Coherence: A Problem in the Art of Arrangement

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Coherence: A Problem in the Art

of Arrangement

A common and legitimate complaint among English teachers is that they don't have enough help in applying theories about language to classroom practices. For this reason, this essay will turn, in an appendix, from the philosophically abstract to the pedagogically concrete. Its main goal, though, is to strengthen the position of discourse analysis in the principal conceptual frame used for rhetoric today. Discourse analysis, the recent, unexpected offspring of linguistics, is now a stepchild to rhetorical studies. Yet it is an ideal link between the fields. We should end the question of where to put discourse analysis in rhetoric by recognizing its potential for teaching coherence; but first we must acknowledge coherence as a problem in the art of arrangement and give arrangement its due.

Coherence is often treated as a matter of invention (careless thinking) or style. It touches on these departments, but its very meaning speaks of form. "Coherence" speaks of order and selection by conveying the "held-together" qualities of words. The fact that form, or arrangement, is the least understood and the least studied of the departments of rhetoric accounts for the uncertain position in rhetoric for discourse analysis; it is time to bring our thinking into line. We need to do two things: (1) to raise our respect for arrangement to the level of our respect for invention, and (2) to increase our use of linguistics in research. The reward will be a clearer picture of what we are doing in rhetoric overall.

Edward P. J. Corbett provides a good starting point in his book Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (copyright 1965). Corbett explains that in classical rhetoric, the process of invention came first--the discovery of arguments; next, disposition--arrangement, or form; and

finally, style, or the verbalization of the arguments.[1] (The fourth and fifth processes, memory and delivery, which pertain to the manner of delivering speeches to a live audience, do not relate here). Corbett expounds on modern uses of arrangement in this way:

> Once the student has discovered, through the process of invention, or discovery of material, something to say on a given subject, he is faced with the problem of selecting and marshalling the available material in order to effect his purpose. . . . This selected material must then be put in some order, for without order the force of even the best material, though chosen with the keenest of discretion, will be weakened.[2]

Though Corbett emphasizes that arrangement goes beyond the study of the parts of a discourse, and cites the ancients to prove his point, he adds, as proof, only concern for the audience and for the arrangement of matter according to its weight and the speaker's judgment. Not until the seventies would this change.

With the seventies came rich beginning of research into invention and style, but arrangement was still no more than lists of the parts of compositions, and arguments about outlines, by and large. The principal exception to this was the work of W. Ross Winterowd, who observed the "infinitely complex relationships" of form and took the definition to new depths. In 1971 he wrote: "Form might be defined as the internal set of consistent relationships perceived in any stretch of discourse."[3] In 1975, Winterowd repeated his words in a book of readings selected to provide both a conceptual framework to organize modern rhetoric and a heuristic for further investigation; the section on form contains some of the most original ideas in the book (Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual

Background with Readings). By implication through the selections he prints, as well as through his interpretations and remarks, Winterowd suggests, "form or coherence" [my italics] is inherent in "discourse at all levels."[4]

With the help of modern grammar, Winterowd had come to see that "our perception of form in discourse comes about through the apprehension of an underlying set of relationships that, for each work, are invariable and basic, but that are 'played off' against a variety of possible surface realizations."[5] He adds,

> It is not unreasonable to posit that our perception of form is contingent upon recognition--intuitive or otherwise--of a set of relationships (i.e., a proposition) in the deep structure of units of discourse, relationships that can gain a variety of surface realizations. In this case, the form is not merely the surface structure--and certainly not the matrix--but the result of the interplay between (1) the variable deep structure, (2) the surface structure that the author has chosen, and (3) the other alternatives made available by a finite system of "organizing" that the "proposition" itself makes possible.[6]

Contemporary Rhetoric reprinted Winterowd's article "The Grammar of Coherence" with a preface expressing his disappointment that the ideas had been rather overlooked. But Winterowd was just before his time. The article is now being cited frequently, as rhetoricians, linguists and educators join him in studying how devices and networks operate at all levels to connect words, to make them discourse.

Another important step towards a modern theory of arrangement was taken in 1976 by Richard Larson. Larson wrote the essay on form for our chief bibliography, Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays (ed. Gary Tate) published that year. In this essay Larson discusses articles printed in Contemporary Rhetoric and elsewhere, pointing to discrepancies in the ways authors perceive the meaning of form. For example, some treat form as if it were a quality of literature only; and some see form in either small or large designs, but not in both. Larson also notes that authors differ in whether they are merely arguing for personal biases, or are introducing new principles of form.[7] Having opened his essay with comments on the dearth of theoretical works, he soon concludes that among the few theorists in this department of rhetoric, even fewer actually explore "fundamental characteristics" of the art.[8] Larson's lament thus helps to establish a place for discourse studies in arrangement and to shape modern concepts of the art.

Larson mentions some of his own articles and one by Willis Pitkin, "Discourse Blocs (1969)" in this context: they stand among the significant recent studies in arrangement. Now in just the time since Teaching Composition appeared, rhetoricians have moved more vigorously into discourse analysis, but they have done this without much understanding-- even among themselves-- of where they fit. (By discourse analysis I mean the examination of the properties of a text which make language coherent and make a body of language seem whole, i.e., which make language discourse rather than random works). There is not enough recognition that in discourse analysis, rhetoricians and linguists meet on common ground --linguists now becoming involved with meanings, rhetoricians with structure, as the two consider coherence from different perspectives.

No doubt one reason for rhetoric's discomfort with discourse analysis is the long-standing argument that grammar has nothing to contribute to writing. A conclusion that follows this view is that linguistics cannot help the teaching of composition. The latter, at least, proves untrue, now that linguists have gone beyond the sentence in their efforts to understand the structure of English. In fact it was about the time when a few rhetoricians began to take arrangement seriously that a few linguists began to break the tradition of limiting their investigations to sentences, and some iconoclasts began examining discourse structure. They may not recognize the relation of their work to ours, for often they have no notion of the directions composition/rhetoric has taken in the last twenty years. But they need us less than we need them. With our extra obligation to make our research useful to pedagogy, we should use all the help with theory that we can get.

Examples of linguistic investigations that pertain to us include such things as studies of the grammatical placement of topics in discourse, the order of old and new information, levels of generalization, and the use of syntactic and semantic links between the various parts of prose. Linguists thus are heading along with us into that uncharted territory of semantics that we share with them. Yet in spite of the value of this work, discourse analysis struggles for acceptance in rhetoric. A tidal wave of concern about process drowns vitally needed interest in describing text, the argument being that the investigation of textual features does not belong in a process-oriented frame. Forced into a defensive position, discourse theorists must answer that we must develop more scientific ways to analyze the structure of discourse so that we can improve the way we teach it. We will do this by using our own methods as well as by using research and methods of linguistics, for discourse analysis is crucial to understanding the process of arrangement.

The crux of this matter may be the need for wider recognition of arrangement as being at least as difficult, and at least as much a process, as invention. Discourse analysis is currently the best means by which we can come to understand arrangement as a process: a process that makes the "inventor's" discoveries coherent to the reader; the process that makes meaning. While we continue investigating how we get ideas and how to inspire them in our students--invention--we must also work to discover how we make ideas coherent and how to teach this--arrangement. In fact, we could say arrangement is the art of giving force and meaning to chaos.

So just as psychology aligns naturally with studies of the composing process, linguistics aligns naturally with studies of form. We will not make the responsible advances on coherence that we should make until we take this as a given and expect our scholars to know what has already been done in linguistics before they try to add to it. And just as scholarship has complicated the concept of invention by studying the mental processes involved in generating and selecting ideas, scholarship must complicate the concept of arrangement by studying mental process as well as the complex arrangements of words that make language cohere.

Finally, because the three arts of rhetoric--invention, arrangement, and style--are really inseparable, we must have studies examining the intricate relations among them when more of the separate complexities of each have been explained.

Such points have to be made, because until we recognize how difficult it is to describe coherence and to teach it, we will continue to teach with inadequate tools. To complain of poor transition, awkwardness or faulty ideas hardly touches the source of difficulty in much student and even academic prose. But if we place coherence soundly in the department of arrangement, and give arrangement the scrutiny it needs, we will

strengthen our conceptual framework in rhetoric and begin to give each department its due.

Appendix

And now, for a suggestion for an informal use of discourse analysis in the classroom, to introduce composition or literature students to principles of arrangement and help them with problems of coherence:

An Exercise to Teach the Art of Arrangement

For the text of this exercise, select a passage of expository prose from an established author--something that will interest your class. The paragraphs of the prose should vary in length, and, ideally, the text should seem a unit in itself but be contiguous with other prose in its source. Type this material single-spaced with no identions for paragraphs, and number the lines of the typescript in the margin. Type your directions and questions as well, and make copies of all this for everyone in the class.

On presenting the exercise to students, explain that after they read the prose they will work independently to divide it into paragraphs. They should read it at least once before they become concerned about paragraphs, and they should be encouraged to write on the text wherever they like as they examine it to answer the questions. Avoid using technical terms in your questions and explanations, and don't emphasize the fact that the students are doing this to answer questions. Instead, try to foster curiosity; stress that there will be no right and wrong answers, just different perceptions of the text. Here are the sorts of questions to ask:

1. Tell how you would divide the passage into paragraphs by listing the number of the line, and the first word, of the opening sentence of each paragraph. You should not change

the order of the sentences, but you do not have to accept the first sentence as the opening of a paragraph, nor the last as a closing.

Example: line 1--no paragraph

Para. 1--line 3, "The"

2 " 7, "People"

Give your reasons for the above paragraphs.

2. How many paragraphs do you have (count whole and halves separately)?
3. Did anything seem wrong with this passage, or hard to read or understand? If yes, tell what.
4. Did the passage seem complete, or in need of something before, after, or both?
5. Can you identify a single main point or central idea in it? If yes, indicate what it is. Whether yes or no, give your reasons.
6. Any further comments?

Students will be keenly interested in learning how their decisions differ from others' and why; try to collate answers on the board or in some other way that allows them to compare results right away. They will see that some sentences obviously serve as paragraph openers, some offer an option, and some sentences cannot open paragraphs. You may also discover that certain ideas have not been adequately related for some readers. With luck, the class will develop hypotheses about differences in readers and how these differences affect the comprehension and interpretation of texts. Thus you have an excellent demonstration of the reason why writers must consider audience. Students will also be interested in discovering how the emphasis changes according to paragraphing. You may even find that indention affects meanings (a good argument for teaching indention as punctuation and for teaching the importance of punctuation, as well). After such careful

attention to the signals connecting and shifting the ideas of prose, the class will soon see coherence as far more than a few lexical devices strewn through the prose for "transition". At first they may cite ideas as the reasons for arrangement of paragraphs, but press them to examine the language to identify specific clues to the arrangement and coherence of the ideas. They will realize then that subtle networks of such things as words, sounds, punctuation, mechanics, and sentence structure create the blocs or sequences of words they call "ideas".

You should not disclose the source of the text, its actual indentions, nor even the number of paragraphs until you have tabulated replies and discussed them. But then you should display the original text, if you can, on an overhead projector or in photocopies (preferably both), so that students can appreciate the visual aspect of arrangement. Be sure to remark that the editor might have altered indentions, and that the appearance of the printed page--the size of its typeface, margins, etc.--might have suggested the final form of the text. You can use the reproduction, too, to liven the discussion of lexical, semantic and syntactic links and networks of ideas that create coherence in the prose. (Different colored pens for the projector can trace different patterns).

You will probably enjoy studying your students' papers later, but I would recommend that you allow your students to write without identifying themselves. On the other hand, I once had an upper-levels English class in stylistics so interested in the excercise that they wanted to expand their judgments in long essays. I got some fascinating papers.

Although I work with university students, I think this exercise could be adapted for other levels, as long as the subject and vocabulary suit the audience. One text I have used for several versions of this exercise works very well: it came from the early pages of the ninth chapter of

Survival, a book-length criticism of Canadian literature by Margaret Atwood (Anasi Press: Toronto, 1972). I use approximately 800 words in one to one-and-a-half hour sessions in a lower-levels elective writing course, and 1200 words when I have longer. Sometimes I allow the exercise to be done at home, but you should consider the pros and cons of out-of-class work before trying this. Among other things, immediate discussion may be best to render certain special results, like students feeling more "o.k." about their use of language when they observe how responses to a professional's writing can vary. They can overcome some destructive inhibitions that stem from the fear that while they will never understand the rules, rules for everything exist, and their teachers know and require them.

The right setting for this exercise, then, the instant feedback and lively discussions sweep many fears away. For the participants, arrangement suddenly becomes a challenge, an act of creation. The concept of audience becomes meaningful when participants realize what it means to write for readers, and once they have expounded on how a professional has failed them, they turn to their own writing with more wisdom and humor for the tasks ahead.

Notes

[1]Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.16.

[2]Corbett, p. 299.

[3]"Dispositio: The Concept of Form in Discourse," College Composition and Communication, 22 (February, 1971), 41.

[4]Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.), p. 170.

[5]Winterowd, p. 165.

[6]Winterowd, p. 166.

[7]Richard L. Larson, "Structure and Form in Non-Fiction Prose," Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 48.

[8]Larson, p. 49.